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Week of
November 10, 1941

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

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†"The Man With Blond Hair" opened Tuesday, November 4th, at the Belasco Theatre.
†"Blithe Spirit" opened Wednesday, November 5th, at the Morosco Theatre.
†"The Walrus and the Carpenter" opened Saturday, November 8th, at the Cort Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"The Walrus and the Carpenter"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *November 10, 1941*

Miss Lord Turns to Comedy in a Play by A. N. Langley

By JOHN MASON BROWN

WHEN Pauline Lord releases the uncertainties of her method on a tragic role, she can add to the part's anguish by the anguish which her own statement of it costs her. Her speeches, which she leaves drooping like wet plumes; her gestures, which struggle hopelessly to get the unsayable said, and her baffled walk, with its dizzy swayings and its goalless sense of befuddlement have all of them proven in the past to be more eloquent than words in expressing the agonies of a cornered being.

These mannerisms of hers, so easily caricatured because so individual, have glowed with a wonder of their own. But the luminous indecision which made her performances in Anne Christie and They Knew What They Wanted inspired, does not supply—in spite of her success in such a comedy as The Late Christopher Bean—the stuffs from which a reliable and dominant comic character can be culled.

The Walrus and the Carpenter made this unhappily clear at the Cort on Saturday night. A. N. Langley's new play, which Alfred de Liagre, Jr., has presented in a very dull setting by Raymond Sovey, is a labored trifle. It is one of those plays, though not a good one, about a deranged household. It tells an overcrowded story about a widow, once rich, who now finds herself without money and in hectic circumstances.

The widow in question is an addle-pated woman whose three daughters appear to be equally addle-pated. One of these unseen and hence perhaps misjudged, is waiting to have a baby upstairs while her husband suffers all the pains known only to expectant fathers. Another is a nice enough young woman who is having her troubles with the impossible literary prig who is her husband. The third is a stage-struck brat in the throes of a violent affair with an obnoxious young actor who is bulging with temperament.

* * *

But the play is, or ought to be, the mother's. At least it was plainly meant to be hers, regardless of whether or not it is much of a play. Indeed, it is so heavily written and so tiresomely developed that it is filled with more yawns than laughs. Even so, The Walrus and the Carpenter might seem more amusing than it now does if only Miss Lord were able to take possession of it with any certainty.

Miss Lord brings a radiant, if giddy, sweetness to her acting of the matriarch. She has her droll moments, and one of the best of these comes when she tries ineffectually to whistle a warning to a son-in-law who is searching her butler's bedroom for the ring he has stolen from her. But uncertainty is the last virtue in a comedy where even the illusion of uncertainty must be the result of planning.

Miss Lord seems hopelessly unsure. Although her shining eyes and tremulous smile indicate what she could do to point a comic line, she makes the fatal mistake of trying to suggest addle-patedness not by remembering her points but by seeming to have forgotten her lines. Instead of creating the confidence essential to comedy's enjoyment, she destroys it. She wanders through Mr. Langley's script with as little precision as Casey Jr., backs, starts, puffs and restarts as the circus train in Dumbo.

Winning though her personality is, Miss Lord throws away laugh after laugh. What is more disastrous, she undoes the production's pace, overleisurely though it is.

Although Gordon Oliver, Harold Landon, Karen Morley, Nicholas Joy and especially Frank Albertson do what they can, the evening as a whole is not a happy one. It is like listening to a poor story when the teller keeps forgetting its point.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *November 10, 1941*

'The Walrus and the Carpenter' Staged

Pauline Lord Gives Fine Performance in Comedy by A. N. Langley at Cort

By JOHN ANDERSON

A GALLANT playwright, Noel Langley seems to have a deep interest in strange and somewhat peculiar women and when he created an odd antique for Ethel Barrymore two years ago in "Farm of Three Echoes" the performance was saluted as a portrait if not a play.

Now he performs a similar, if less fascinating service for Pauline Lord who appeared at the Cort Theatre Saturday night in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" as an erratic widow with three daughters, no money, and a disappearing mind. Miss Lord, who is one of our greatest actresses, flutters superbly through three acts and gives some substance to a tissue paper comedy which rustles pleasantly now and then with amusement as it drifts around the stage and finally succeeds in amounting to almost zero.

As a dramatic exercise for Miss Lord it is something she can do with her fingers crossed and both hands behind her back. Mr. de Liagre has assembled a good cast, directed it smartly, and produced the whole thing handsomely all for reasons that are hardly apparent.

For while Mr. Langley has suggested an amusing central character in Essie Stuyvesant he hasn't given her anything to be central in. The complications which beset her are more fretful than entertaining, and I had almost as much trouble as Miss Lord did in keeping my mind on them.

Blessed Event

One of Mrs. Stuyvesant's daughters, suitably married to an incompetent dimwit, was busy upstairs throughout the play having a baby—a protracted proceeding which caused a doctor, a nurse, and members of the family to run about so pointlessly that I sympathized with the nurse when she explained sternly that a hospital was the place for childbirth.

Another daughter seemed to be having endless and somewhat tiresome squabbles with her husband—a selfish egotist convinced of his own literary genius, while the youngest, just seventeen, spent the three acts in brawling puppy love with an adolescent actor who, thank God, was finally drafted into the army.

If you add to these precariously meagre situations a young man dunning poor Essie for four months rent, and being dragged into the domestic mess, and a snooty butler who swipes a valuable ring, you have approximately all there is to "The Walrus and the Carpenter." All, at least, except Miss Lord's performance.

Masterly Sketch

Even when you see quite plainly how Miss Lord gets her effects—the helpless hands, the trailing voice, broken sentences, and wandering smile there is no escaping the effect. With all her familiar mannerisms she does create out of the skimpiest materials a masterly sketch of mental confusion and sheer goofiness.

She can accent a line with incredible intuition, and she can let lines fall to pieces with hilarious results. I am perfectly content just to watch her, but it would be wonderful to see her again in something like "Ethan Frome," "The Late Christopher Bean" or "They Knew What They Wanted," for she is one of the great women of the theatre and deserves the best.

The supporting actors are all suitably effective and there are good performances by Karen Morley, Frank Albertson, Frances Heflin, Alan Hewitt and Nicholas Joy. Mr. de Liagre has let his direction veer toward farce, probably in a shrewd effort through action and speed to divert attention from the flimsiness of the comedy.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
November 10, 1941

'I Doubt It,' Said the Carpenter

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE general idea of *The Walrus and the Carpenter* is old as the hills, but that alone won't explain why it is so bad. I'm afraid that the author, rather than any of his predecessors, must be blamed for the dialogue, the general lack of buoyancy and some of the less magnetic characterizations. I'm even afraid that Pauline Lord did less than she might have done with the chief role. Altogether, at any rate, *The Walrus and the Carpenter* is one of the dreariest and emptiest evenings that have come under the heading of comedy for some time.

The play is one of those things that take place in an attractive, well-bred drawing room, but evoke the atmosphere of a madhouse. At the head of the household is a fluttery, hen-brained lady who owes her butler three months' wages and her landlord four months' rent, and whose furniture is about to be deposited in the street. One of her daughters is married to a young littérateur who spits on the world and sneers at his in-laws. A second daughter is never formally introduced to the audience, seeing as she's giving birth to a baby, but her frenzied husband carries on enough for the two of them. A third daughter is undergoing a whole series of noisy crises in puppy love with a young man who ought not to exist, even in a play. Just for contrast, there's a doctor who would seem to be normal, except that he's in love with the lady of the house.

For three acts, the author either rotates these exhibits or combines them. They are all, of course, out of the warehouse; but even such old hat as the high-school Cleopatra and the hoity-toity genius needn't have been forced to arouse anybody's actual hostility. And the lines, with very few exceptions, were singularly unfunny.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *November 10, 1941*

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" Produced at the Cort Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

A. N. LANGLEY was the author of "Farm of Three Echoes," a South African melodrama in which Ethel Barrymore played a very old Boer who was handy with a shotgun.

Mr. Langley's latest dramatic outburst is "The Walrus and the Carpenter," a comedy cast in a more conventional mold, and produced by Alfred de Liagre Jr. last Saturday evening at the Cort Theatre.

The Stuyvesant family of East 88th Street is Mr. Langley's concern this time. A widow for two years, Mrs. Stuyvesant, a vague, flighty creature, finds herself without funds and immersed in debts while her three daughters and two sons-in-law, far from being of any assistance, are in a continuous state of emotional upheaval. One of the daughters never comes on the stage, but is upstairs having a baby, necessitating much running up and down on the part of an acidulous trained nurse, and serving as an excuse for numerous visits by the family doctor, who is sweet on mother but can't get her to stand still long enough to listen to a proposal.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" is apparently intended to be one of those family comedies of the "You Can't Take It With You" school, but it is so lacking in plot and its characters are on the whole so uninteresting that we found it singularly devoid of charm, wit and other desirable qualities. The Stuyvesants prove to be a dull and tiresome family, and the fact that they can't pay the rent and are generally hard up is not, as it happens, sufficiently novel to intrigue anybody except, perhaps, a few Doris Dukes and Barbara Huttons who might possibly consider it a quaint experience to be dunned by the landlord.

Faced with three acts in which almost nothing happens except family bickering, some pilfering by the butler, and an offstage birth, Mr. de Liagre waxes somewhat frantic in his direction. Nor is the production helped much by Pauline Lord's muddled performance as Mrs. Stuyvesant.

The Case of Pauline Lord

We have for some time been baffled by Miss Lord, being unable to decide whether her breathless, absent-minded delivery is a calculated theatrical technique or simply extreme first-night nervousness and difficulty in remembering her lines. Whatever it is, it is not suited to the sort of comedy Mr. Langley is trying to serve up in "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Now and then Miss Lord's slightly balmy attack is amusing, but much of the time it is merely trying and has a ruinous effect on the pace of the play.

The company in general works itself into a lather trying to generate a few laughs, but of this piece. Although we became pretty sick there is very little hilarity to be dragged out of the unseen daughter who was having a baby, she did provide a reasonable pretext for bringing in Nicholas Joy as the family doctor, and Mr. Joy is as charming and urbane as ever.

Karen Morley, the film actress, makes her Broadway stage debut in "The Walrus and the Carpenter," and although her role gives her little opportunity, she has a lovely low speaking voice, a nice sense of repose and reads her lines with a quiet authority that is very pleasant.

Frank Albertson, as the prospective father, has his moments of amusement, for which he works like a coal-heaver, and Alan Hewitt does a neat bit as an insufferable son-in-law who has written a book entitled "Morons, Morons Everywhere." Frances Heflin and Harold Landon handle the pseudo tragic adolescent love duets vigorously and Gordon Oliver is an amazingly amiable landlord. It turns out he is merely a nephew of a member of the firm and knows very little about real estate or anything else.

Mr. de Liagre has provided Broadway with some amusing family comedies in the past—"Three-Cornered Moon" and "Yes My Darling Daughter" among them. "The Walrus and the Carpenter," however, fails to live up to its predecessors.

'THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER'

A comedy in three acts by A. N. Langley; staged by Alfred de Liagre, Jr.; setting by Raymond Sovey; presented at the Cort Theatre on November 8, 1941, by Mr. de Liagre.

The cast:

Corder	Ivan Triesault
Grant Magill	Gordon Oliver
Nurse Pyngar	Mary Boylan
Bickey Stuyvesant	Frances Heflin
Essie Stuyvesant	Pauline Lord
Gerda Marks	Karen Morley
Wilfred Marks	Alan Hewitt
Roland Wayne	Harold Landon
Yipper Pickford	Frank Albertson
Dr. Sidney Drew	Nicholas Joy
Policeman	John Donegan

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *November 10, 1941*

Pauline Lord Is Back in "The Walrus And the Carpenter"

"The Walrus and the Carpenter," comedy by A. N. Langley. Produced by Alfred de Liagre Jr., at the Cort Theatre, New York, Nov. 8, 1941.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

EVERYBODY whoever comes in contact, even remotely, with the birth of a delayed firstborn suffers a little, I suspect. Take, if you will, the case of an off-stage lady in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" at the Cort Theatre Saturday night——

Even she, non-existent though she was, was able to communicate what you might describe as the spirit of her suffering to the audience.

Every time the lightly hysterical and frightfully expectant father rushed up the stairs, or the nurse rushed down, a tremor of one sort or another ran through the audience.

Sometimes it excited a mild mirth. Sometimes it just made everybody anxious. Frequently, I have no doubt it, awakened disturbing memories.

Finally it got so you could, listening closely, make out murmurs of "Gawd, I wish she'd have it and get it over with!" Or "I don't suppose we'll be through with that until the last act!"

A. N. Langley, the author, hoped, of course, that everybody would find the situation highly amusing for sustained periods. If he did I'm afraid he was disappointed.

Pleasantly Unimportant

Otherwise, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is an inconsequential little comedy about an excitable family caught in one of its most exciting moments.

Not only is big sister having a baby upstairs, but little sister is following a puppy-love romance downstairs that runs in and out of the front door like something possessed.

And mother is trying to put off the rent collector while the doctor is proposing to her, and sister Gerda is slowly discovering that her husband is what the older melodramatics used to describe as an insufferable cad.

Mr. Langley is the young South African who, after he left the Natal university, became a radio announcer for the African Broadcasting Co. and later wrote "Farm of Three Echoes," which Ethel Barrymore played two years back.

He has a nice feeling for the theatre, which, I believe, he has been selling as a scenarist on the West Coast. His dialogues is frequently above average, too. But, of course, he has to have more than a few interesting situations to fill out an evening.

Star and Support

Pauline Lord plays the flustered mother with that fascinating uncertainty, which is really an uncanny timing sense, that gives her performances an individual charm, either in comedy or drama.

Mr. de Liagre has found a nice cast of young people, mostly from Hollywood, to support her. These include Karen Morley, Frank Albertson, Harold Landon, Gordon Oliver and Frances Heflin—particularly Frances Heflin, who is Van Heflin's young sister and a blossoming ingenue of splendid promise.

Nicholas Joy is again a dependable anchor man, being this department's favorite in that role, and Alan Hewitt is a help. A nice interior by Raymond Sovey. Mr. de Liagre had fun with the direction, which is spirited and smart.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *November 10, 1941*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The Walrus and the Carpenter"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH Pauline Lord is a great actress, she does not have much luck with plays. "The Walrus and the Carpenter," which was acted at the Cort on Saturday evening, is no exception. It is a harum-scarum comedy by A. N. Langley, author of the macabre "Farm of Three Echoes," in which Ethel Barrymore pretended to be as old as the hills two seasons ago. Supposing, with some reason, that the antics of a family of irresponsible individualists might interest an audience, Mr. Langley has written an animated cartoon under high pressure, and Alfred de Liagre Jr., serving as producer and director, has turned the performance into a foot-race. Excepting a few amusing episodes and a scene or two that Miss Lord makes astonishingly credible, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" turns out to be a foolish whimsey, exhausting to act, wearisome to listen to.

* * *

The most potent of the Stuyvesants of East Eighty-eighth Street never appears on the stage. She is upstairs impatiently awaiting the arrival of her first baby. An acidulous nurse, an unctuous physician, a distracted father-in-the-making and any number of hysterical Stuyvesants race upstairs and down in accordance with the crisis of this over-wrought accouchement. Finally the baby is born in about five minutes, the family obstetrician returning to his drink downstairs as immaculate and septic as he was before the baby signal was sounded. Modern medicine is wonderful.

But that first lesson in anatomy is only the background for Mr. Langley's tumultuous lark. For Essie Stuyvesant, widow, is mother of a family of upper-class irresponsibles who are afflicted with vertigo. One of the daughters is sensible, apart from the fact she is married to the socially self-conscious author of "Morons, Morons Everywhere." But the youngest daughter is a bundle of screaming nerves, in love with a bedlamite actor, and the young father-in-the-making is touched in the head. Mrs. Stuyvesant tries to calm each member of the family in turn, but she is not very bright to begin with. Add "Hellzapoppin" to "You Can't Take It With You," and install it in a Raymond Sovey duplex apartment on the other side of the town, and you have a rough floor-plan of "The Walrus and the Carpenter," previously known as "The Mulberry Bush."

* * *

It is not without its moments in the acting. As usual, Miss Lord has imagined all the significant details of the character she is playing. In the most crucial moments she never forgets her manners; and the one genuinely funny moment of the play finds her trying to whistle a signal of warning to a son-in-law while she is preserving the amenities of polite society with a visitor in the drawing room. Frances Heflin acts one scene particularly well when she is rebelling at a conspiracy of her elders. And Karen Morley plays the part of a comparatively sensible daughter with poise and clarity. Nicholas Joy contributes his familiar portrait of polished assurance as the dapper physician. There is more than a dash of the George Abbott technique in Frank Albertson's playing, although Mr. de Liagre may have encouraged it.

When a whizzbang like "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is funny, it is hilarious. When it is not, it is boring. Oh Lord, when are you going to find a good play?

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *November 10, 1941*

'The Walrus and the Carpenter' Opens at the Cort Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

TAKING a tip, as well as a title, from Lewis Carroll, A. N. Langley talks of a good many things in "The Walrus and the Carpenter," which was pleasantly played Saturday evening at the Cort. He achieves a mild confusion of incidents and an amiable, disarming comedy which grows better as it progresses and has the further considerable virtue of bringing back Miss Pauline Lord.

Miss Lord is, as always, somewhat harried, but this time nothing dire befalls her. She is cast as the mother of a turbulent brood, living insolvently in a house in East 88th street and ministered too grumpily by a butler who not only is named Corder but is a thief at heart. One of her daughters is having a baby upstairs, while the appropriate son-in-law writhes amusingly. A second child is having trouble with her husband, an incipient author. The third and youngest has a problem-child for boy friend. The family, which meets its difficulties with excited shouts, is also bothered by a gentlemanly rent collector, who in the past went romantically to school with the middle daughter.

It may puzzle you to imagine how an author could pull these raveled threads into a play. I must confess to a suspicion that it has also puzzled Mr. Langley, who compromises by more or less giving the whole problem a miss. This bothers for a time, but presently it becomes possible to accept Miss Lord in lieu of plot and be content in a comfortable nest of domestic anecdotes. The play grows more amusing from act to act, stolen rings are recovered and apparently worthless bonds become valuable. Everything, in short, straightens itself out.

There is a friendly quality about it, and this no doubt stems in large part from the gracious acting of Miss Lord. Her preoccupied, artfully casual playing of the scatter-brained mother gives gentle reality to Mr. Langley's little play. She welcomes you to the home of the disturbed Stuyvesants and persuades you to share in their comic tribulations. She also persuades you to believe in them. In thus winning an audience she is assisted by most of the others. Nicholas Joy is blandly assured as the family doctor who helps set things right and finally takes the fluttering Mrs. Stuyvesant under his wing. Frank Albertson is heartily comic as the worried father; Frances Heflin is engaging as the youngest daughter and Karen Morley, Gordon Oliver and Harold Landon are notable among the others. Alfred de Liagre, Jr., has directly the play suavely, at a pace suitable to Miss Lord's acting method. It is a charming, if unsubstantial, comedy.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *November 10, 1941*

Family Antics

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

ANOTHER of those mad, mad families is temporarily frisking about the stage of the Cort Theater. As usual, the mother is particularly scatter-brained, with no head for figures and a cute talent for domestic confusion. Again the children, in their brightly innocent fashion, find themselves in emotional jams of one sort or another, usually quite whimsical. Once more saner and more practical visitors to the madcap home are first startled, then charmed by the quaint antics of the merry lunatics whom the author obviously finds so enchanting. The only danger always is that the audience may not accept the charm with equal enthusiasm.

* * *

As a matter of fact, there is nothing that goes more flat than one of these whimsical domestic comedies that doesn't come off. The current manifestation, which is called "The Walrus and the Carpenter," has the great misfortune to be completely ineffectual in both its charm and its humor and only successful in making its people seem a trifle idiotic. With a minimum of lightness and dexterity and a maximum of elephantine fancy, A. N. Langley, who once wrote a minor Ethel Barrymore vehicle called "The Farm of Three Echoes," makes his Stuyvesant family a group of bores who have little attractiveness and much inanity. Their adventures are minor.

* * *

For the tenuous frailty of "The Walrus and the Carpenter," most of the actors certainly are not to blame. Nevertheless it cannot be said that Miss Pauline Lord, the star of the proceedings, has a happy role as the mother of the Stuyvesants. A brilliant actress in her own type of intense, half-eerie emotional tragedy, Miss Lord is far from at home in a part that is hopefully intended as light, buoyant and dexterous, and she is clearly uncomfortable amid the insipid high spirits of Mr. Langley's antic little comedy. It is difficult to blame her.

* *

The others are more satisfactorily cast. Miss Karen Morley, for example, plays one of the daughters with honesty and simplicity, while Miss Frances Heflin as the younger Stuyvesant girl demonstrates that she is an ingenue of skill and charm. In addition, Alan Hewitt, who should long be remembered as the "Time" salesman in "Love's Old Sweet Song," plays a fake intellectual shrewdly; Frank Albertson makes a foolish husband more bearable than you would expect, and Nicholas Joy and Gordon Oliver represents sanity pleasantly and well: "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is of no proper support to any of them.

"Blithe Spirit"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *November 6, 1941*

Noel Coward's 'Blithe Spirit' Opens at the Morosco Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

SINCE the world is obviously in a dreary condition, Noel Coward has gone out of it into a realm of delightful ghosts. They glide cheerfully through the scenes of "Blithe Spirit," which opened last evening at the Morosco.

They make Mr. Coward's "improbable farce" an improbable delight. They, and the humans they plague, are witty in Coward's best manner—witty and gay, and for all their cerements as fresh as daisies.

They are not frightening ghosts and only comically perturb the English novelist to whom they happen. He is living placidly enough with his wife in Kent and plans only to dabble his fingers in the occult. He permits a breezy seeress to practice in his drawing room, not dreaming that her spells will summon back his lovely, mischievous first wife, dead these seven years. It disturbs him when she glides in, looking preposterously handsome and rather pale, but otherwise just as much of a problem as she ever was.

Things at which I shall only hint happen thereafter, with that delicate precision of which Mr. Coward is capable when he is really ticking over. Only the bewildered, but verbally unsubdued, husband can see the wraith and only floating flower vases convince his living wife. The ghost has returned with a plot in her protoplasmic mind, and it works out oddly, so that by the third act there are two ghosts both pale and beautiful and sharp of tongue. How the doubly haunted survivor is extricated you will wish, I think, to discover for yourselves.

The plot is slight, but it suffices. There is no one better than Mr. Coward at bouncing a slender plot on his knee, perfectly timing small happenings, inventing tirelessly and not ever doing precisely what is expected. Mr. Coward has never, I think, been happier in his inventions or more adept. He has seldom written more amusingly. His dialogue, after you have laughed over it, leaves that aftertaste which is the pleasant concomitant of astute craftsmanship. Here he is saying the small things he wants to say with effortless perfection. Politely avoiding epigram as too stuffy, he spurs laughter with an inflection, makes comedy out of oblique departures from the obvious. He is, in short, doing very nicely, even for Mr. Coward.

Such polished antics as "Blithe Spirit" need actors, and actors are what John C. Wilson's production has got. It has Clifton Webb, to skim the bright surface of the role of the wraith-infested husband, crackling as he skims. It has Miss Peggy Wood to do some of the best acting she has ever done as the more substantial wife, frantically trying to come to grips with an invisible adversary.

Leonora Corbett has been imported to float entrancingly as the primary ghost—an impertinent, witty ghost, a little put out at having been interrupted in her game of backgammon with Ghengis Khan. Mildred Natwick, who fortunately for all of us does not have to be imported, frolics as the breezy medium, being about as funny as the law allows. (This law, which seldom needs to be enforced, protects customers from flying into small pieces.) Jacqueline Clark is a comical maid-servant, who has more to do with things than you will imagine, and Philip Tonge and Phyllis Joyce play outfield positions faultlessly.

It's all a delightful lark. And let's hear no more of this talk about ghosts being unenchanting on the stage. Nothing is gayer than a good, Coward ghost.

'BLITHE SPIRIT'

A comedy in three acts by Noel Coward, staged by John C. Wilson, setting by Stewart Chaney, presented at the Morosco Theater on November 5, 1941, by Mr. Wilson. The cast:

Edith	Jacqueline Clark
Ruth	Peggy Wood
Charles	Clifton Webb
Dr. Bradman	Philip Tonge
Mrs. Bradman	Phyllis Joyce
Madame Arcati	Mildred Natwick
Elvira	Leonora Corbett

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *November 6, 1941*

There Are Happy Ghosts in Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit"

"Blithe Spirit," an "improbable farce" by Noel Coward. Produced by John C. Wilson at the Morosco theatre, New York, Nov. 5, 1941.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

FUN at the Morosco. Riotous fun for the first two acts of Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit." Ghostly fun at its finish. It is, I'd say, the most deliberately impudent item of the Coward comedy series, and one of his most ingenious plots.

I admit, however, that an entire evening of ghostly wit naturally wears a little thin along about final curtain time. You know how it is with ghosts, even when they are friendly and amusing. You begin to see through them.

Mr. Coward's idea is to revive, if not to sustain your interest by doubling the order at the end. Peggy Wood, who has been having a grand setto all evening with a materialized shade who was her husband's first wife, is suddenly herself popped off in the interest of a third act.

Peggy makes a lovely ghost, too. But she sort of crowds the ghostly scene, and that is a letdown. Last night's friendly audience didn't seem to mind, however.

Ghost Working

It is Mr. Coward's galloping fancy to imagine the predicament an investigating novelist might find himself in if at a seance he organised to gather material for a new book his first wife should come back to harass and devil his second wife.

This is what happens to Charles, the novelist of the farce. The first wife, incidentally, as bodied forth in luminous gray by Leonora Corbett, recently arrived from London, is a lovely apparition, with a Coward wit and a mischievous sense of fun.

Having been brought from the spirit world by a medium's brat of a control, little Daphne (who is suffering at the moment from a celestial head cold and is even more irritating than usual), Elvira has great fun reminding Charles of their happy days and nights together.

This stirs Ruth's jealousy, even though she is quite sure her husband must be suffering an attack of nerves. No man in his normal senses could go mooning about a room carrying on conversations with a dead first wife, and only Charles can hear what Elvira is saying.

Most of his answers, naturally, Ruth accepts as insults directed at her. And when the mischievous Elvira begins handing her things out of the air Ruth is something more than nonplussed. She is practically flabbergasted. And darned mad.

Ghostly Plot

It is Elvira's idea that if she can get Charles into an automobile accident and make a ghost of him, too, life in the spirit world will take on new color. But it is Ruth who takes the car, and it is Ruth who passes on.

Charles' effort to be rid of both his ghostly irritants by forcing the medium into another trance keeps the last act moving. But the fun is never quite as happy after the funeral.

The performances are all exceptional. Clifton Webb draws on the role of Charles to find it a perfect fit. Leonora Corbett, the Elvira, is an ethereal inspiration, charmingly different, as a ghost should be. And Peggy Wood keeps splendidly in the attractive but independent second wife tradition.

Mildred Natwick picks up the part of the enthused medium as though Coward had written it especially for her. I'm sure no one will ever play it better than she, though no one will ever completely fail with it.

Philip Tonge, Phillis Joyce and Jacqueline Clark fill in capably. Stewart Chaney has furnished an attractive English interior. John C. Wilson did the directing, which is as Coward would have it.

"Blithe Spirit"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *November 6, 1941*

Noel Coward's 'Blithe Spirit' Opens at Morosco Theatre

Hilariously Funny Farce Depicts Wife Returning from Beyond the Grave

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE it seemed impossible to stop the war long enough for Noel Coward to settle back to his playwriting he snatched a week off from his official duties and dashed off a little farce called "Blithe Spirit" which shook the Morosco to its laughter rafters last night when it was presented by John C. Wilson.

Mr. Coward describes it himself as an improbable farce which is the year's wildest understatement. The play is also hilariously funny, brilliantly clever and about as cockeyed as a play can be and still stay on the stage. Even its subject matter makes it just the place to die laughing.

For Mr. Coward has been bold enough to write his farce about a man whose first wife returns from beyond the grave to make an astral nuisance of herself and wreck his second marriage. You might suppose that the sight of the spectral but jealous lady would cause the creeps, if not the horrors, but Mr. Coward is so skillful in his writing, and so amazingly adroit in his plot (and so lucky in some perfect performances) that it becomes a goofy ghost story, full of malice and merriment. It is a side-splitting "Design for Living" with one foot of its eternal triangle in the grave.

This sort of fooling demands, of course, not only superb tact, but the sly and easy precision of a juggler. If it went too far in almost any direction it could become macabre, embarrassing, or merely silly. But Mr. Coward keeps his farce spinning so airily that there is no time for it to hit anything except the funnybone.

His whole introduction of the deceased but slightly vindictive Elvira is done in a seance with a screwball medium that is a comic sketch all by itself. No one could be more happily surprised than the medium herself at her occult powers, and no one more bewildered when she finds that she is only a one-way medium, and that she can't get rid of the troublesome, though beautiful spook. That makes it tough on the ghosted bigamist.

Fantastic Fun

Since the situation is so fantastically funny just by itself you do not see how anyone could keep it going for three acts without letting it flatten out. Yet Mr. Coward not only sustains it, but tops one act with another, and even builds an amusing tag at the end.

It is difficult to figure out exactly how much of the tale can be told without spoiling the fun for later playgoers so I shall be as silent as Elvira's tomb should have been, if she had only stayed in it. But as a matter of fact it is not the story so much as the endlessly incredible situations it creates that make the evening ripple from end to end with laughter.

Mr. Wilson has assembled an excellent cast and directed the performance with smart inflection and unfailing humor. To say that some of the performances are uncanny is in the circumstances, no more than the literal truth, especially in the unearthly mischief of Leonora Corbett, who herewith makes her American debut as the restless Elvira. It is a performance of rare grace and perception, of ghostly gaiety and ethereal melancholy, done in a masterly makeup that is spectral but not unpleasant, beautiful and unreal.

As the slightly balmy medium, who short-circuits the hereafter, Mildred Natwick gives the best performance of her career in a fine rich part. Mr. Coward has written just enough spiritualistic patter and everyday claptrap into the part to keep it firmly on earth and almost comically burlesque, and Miss Natwick never misses a trick.

Bitterness and Talk

Since the upshot of wifely resurrection is to cause bitterness and talk in the otherwise happy second marriage of Charlie Condomines the flesh and blood parts are safely bestowed on Peggy Wood and Clifton Webb.

They must quarrel over the spooky lady; they must sting one another with Mr. Coward's most malicious epigrams, and behave, finally, like a pair of unhappy, though vocal, barbed wire fences. Mr. Webb's gift for manicured insult is justly celebrated, and while he hasn't quite the elegant snarl Mr. Coward himself might put in some of the lines, he is excellent as the inadvertant bigamist, bewitched, bothered and bewildered.

Miss Wood is altogether attractive and delightful as the enraged second wife—sharing the husband with a pretty apparition, and her shadow boxing with the lovely shade is hilarious in its exasperation.

Stewart Chaney's single setting seems exactly right for farcical spook-believe and Mainbocher's dresses and stylish shrouds make Miss Wood and Miss Corbett look stunning dead or alive.

So this ouija board says see "Blithe Spirit" by all means—and just for fun.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *November 6, 1941*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Blithe Spirit"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

PROBABLY Noel Coward ought to be feeling grave amid the anxieties of beleagured London. But it is to be feared that the war has made him frivolous.

For "Blithe Spirit," which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is a completely insane farce that is also uproarious. It hardly touches the stage as it rides a demented broomstick to hilarity. In the old days of peace the West End's Null Cahd used occasionally to have a serious thought on his mind about the iniquities of neurotic society or the grandeur of England. But "Blithe Spirit" is relaxed. It is pure entertainment. It is a travesty of ghost stories, told with the sardonic impeccability of a cafe wit.

* * *

A novelist is living with his second wife in a state of fashionable discontentment. To accumulate a little useful information about the occult for a novel he is writing he invites a spiritualist to hold a seance in his house. She does, and to such good purpose that the spirit of his first wife returns from the psychic beyond, and raises hob with his domestic arrangements. For she is not a noble spirit. She is vain and covetous. Through some eerie mischance, she even translates the second wife into a spirit. And the third act of the play finds the novelist plagued by two spirits that cannot leave him and cannot get away from each other.

That is the framework of "Blithe Spirit." But it hardly suggests the comic absurdities of Mr. Coward's high-spirited lark, which is full of droll malice and farcical insincerity. To him the mumbo-jumbo of spiritualism is an invitation to poke fun at solemn characters and write lines with a caustic stick. He skips through the exposition with witty alacrity. He picks up some vagrant laughs with the low-comedy part of fleet-footed servant drudge. As usual, he smashes crockery to point a climax. And the part of the maidenly spiritualist he has translated into a remarkably funny satire on old saws and bogus good cheer.

* * *

There is hardly enough material in "Blithe Spirit" to cover the end of your little finger. And it must be confessed that the basic joke runs thin before Mr. Coward is finished. The whole third act could be dispensed with without cheating the customers. But even the third act is brighter than any ghost story this department ever encountered before. For Mr. Coward is in a rare mood of inconsequential mischief.

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Under John C. Wilson's direction, the farce is played with great vivacity. Clifton Webb can turn a line with as much neat dexterity as Mr. Coward can write it. As the second wife, Peggy Wood plays with bustle, pettiness and animation in the exact key of the part and play. Leonora Corbett's airy restlessness and spitefulness are also amusing in the haunting part of the first wife's spirit. Jacqueline Clark acts the servant girl like a startled wild hare. The most substantial part in the play is the character of the spinster spiritualist, and Mildred Natwick plays it with enormous invention and gusto. Out of all Mr. Coward's tart hocus-pocus she has created a fantastic character.

Mr. Coward's holiday charade is crackbrained and funny. It is a small thing, and unmistakably his own.

"Blithe Spirit"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *November 6, 1941*

Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" A Comedy Hit at the Morosco

By WILELLA WALDORF

A FEW months ago, when bombs were falling on England every night, Noel Coward sat down in a country house in Kent and wrote "an improbable farce" in which war is never mentioned. "Blithe Spirit" is its title, and it is one of the reigning hits of London's West End. Last night John C. Wilson produced it here at the Morosco Theatre and it is now also one of the reigning hits of Broadway. Once again, war or no war, Mr. Coward finds himself with an international success on his hands.

With a small cast of seven characters, only four of major importance, and a single set, Mr. Coward has managed with unfailing skill and remarkable inventiveness to spin out an original situation that is hilarious to begin with, but which, we must admit, seemed in danger of dwindling at the end of the first act. So much happens in that act that one is apt to spend the intermission wondering how on earth the author is going to keep things going until eleven o'clock, and fearing that he won't be up to it.

But he is, every minute of the time. The second act, if anything, is even more hilarious than the first, and the third matches it. "Blithe Spirit" as a whole turns out to be one of Mr. Coward's most adroit concoctions, and the ingenious fashion in which he has sustained the perilously high pitch of his farce commands admiration and respect even while you are laughing nearly every minute the curtain is up.

Mr. Coward presents Charles, a novelist living in rural England with his second wife, Ruth. His latest book is to contain some reflections on psychic phenomena and he wants to brush up on the technical jargon employed during a seance. Hence Mme. Arcati, a noted medium living in the neighborhood, is invited to dinner. Mme. Arcadi, besides dabbling in spiritualism, also writes books for children containing myriads of extremely talkative flora and fauna; her conversation consists mainly of famous quotations and she goes everywhere on a bicycle, dressed in peculiar raiment, including a garment made entirely of fringe.

After dinner a seance is in order. Charles, Ruth and their guests, Dr. and Mrs. Bradman sit down at a table, hands touching, while Mme. Arcati plays "Always" on the gramophone and proceeds to call up her "control," a little girl with a cold named Daphne, who died in 1886. Nothing much happens while the lights are out except that Mme. Arcati is temporarily knocked out by the disturbance to her vibrations, and everybody finally goes home, leaving Charles and Ruth alone. At this point a strong breeze blows aside the window curtains and a dazzling apparition sweeps into the room. It is Elvira, Charles' first wife, who "passed over" seven years ago.

To say that she is a dazzling apparition is not exaggerating Elvira's charms, for Miss Leonora Corbett, who plays her, is not only a divinely graceful and etherial creature but is made up and costumed in extraordinary fashion, all in silver grey, including hair and skin, with a wicked golden gleam in her eye, reddish lips and a faint green light that follows here wherever she goes. Her advent on the scene is startling, and when it develops that nobody but Charles can see or hear her, the plot begins its intricate winding.

This is only the beginning. In the two acts that follow, Mr. Coward has outdone himself in the wittiness of his dialogue and the ingenuity with which he keeps his play spinning along in the blithest spirit imaginable.

A Brilliant Cast

Clifton Webb gives what is undoubtedly one of the keenest performances of his career as Charles, while Peggy Wood, who took a big turn for the better last season in "Old Acquaintance," is delightfully mettlesome as Ruth, the second wife who is none too happy with the wraith of the first one floating about the house. Let us hope Miss Wood sticks to brittle parts for years to come, and that she has abandoned forever those buxom cream-of-wheaty females she used to play so wholesomely.

As we indicated above, the town is sure to be all but delirious over the fascinating figure of Miss Corbett—an English actress making her Broadway debut in this piece. It is a joy to watch her move and to hear her speak. Granted, her part is one that any actress would give ten years of her life to be permitted to play, but that does not alter the fact that Miss Corbett does it beautifully. We have saved Mildred Natwick's Mme. Arcati until the last because it must be admitted that this department has long been in an admiring trance over Miss Natwick's amazing facility for playing all kinds of roles in all kinds of productions, and never failing to etch out of sometimes very little indeed an unforgettable character. This time she has a meaty part and she plays it in the best Natwick tradition, which is the highest praise we can think of at the moment.

Let us add a good word for Jacqueline Clark, who is perfectly cast as Edith, the housemaid with a passion for speed, and for John C. Wilson's skillful direction. It is doubtful if Mr. Coward himself could have improved upon his production.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM", *November 6, 1941*

Noel Coward Tells a Wraithy Story

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THERE'S no reason to keep you in suspense: *Blithe Spirit* is an altogether gay and amusing evening—the kind of thing Noel Coward does at something close to his best, and the kind of thing that only Noel Coward can do. Naturally—and fortunately—it's pure sponge cake—for who could think of Mr. Coward having a go at the real meat and drink of life without suppressing, or even actually uttering, a groan?

To Mr. Coward's particular credit it should be said that, in his choice of a farcical plot, he took an incredibly dangerous chance and came through without a spill. For the joke he has extended—or, if you insist, somewhat over-extended—through three acts and seven scenes, has to do with ghosts. With ghosts that materialize, that multiply, that talk and laugh, that frisk and frolic. It takes a pretty brave fellow to try anything like that; but more to the point, it takes a pretty brilliant fellow to succeed at it.

Blithe Spirit is concerned with a novelist who, to get material for a book, has in a medium—and what a medium!—for a seance. At the gathering, this wild and daffy creature somehow conjured up out of the other world the novelist's beautiful first wife. Once arrived, she won't depart, and she begins to create quite a to-do in the household, what with one very live wife there already. A great many things start happening which it would be cheating to tell you about—but a great many better things than any one had a right to expect after the curtain went down on the first act. For if *Blithe Spirit* contains its quota of dead spots and desperate moments, they are negligible compared to the consistently bright inventiveness and resourcefulness of the play as a whole. Indeed, Mr. Coward's ability to keep his hard-battered ball in the air, to squeeze further comic twists out of something you would swear must eventually plunk down with a thud, is only less admirable than his ability to make his highly spectral setup seem reasonable while it lasts. Add to this his way of batting out funny lines, his very expert verbal sense, and you have the three things that it takes—whatever the textbooks may say—to make a good farce.

And *Blithe Spirit* has also, fortunately what it takes to make a good farce come alive on the stage: a swell production. Mr. Wilson has given it, in his direction, lightness, liveliness and speed, and the cast is as good as any one could ask for. As the wild-eyed medium who, with wonderful incongruity, talks the hearty, play-the-game tosh of a girl scout leader, Mildred Natwick gives a screamingly funny and immensely accomplished performance. Here is, of course, the fattest role in the play. But Leonora Corbett is lively and charming as the beautiful chalk-white wraith who returns from the Upper Regions, and Peggy Wood plays the hard-tried second wife with considerable skill and style. Clifton Webb is suave, as always, in a not too rewarding role, and in smaller parts both Phyllis Joyce and Jacqueline Clark are excellent. *Blithe Spirit*, as Miss Natwick might say before going into a trance, is corking good fun.

"Blithe Spirit"

Reprinted from **NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM,** *November 6, 1941*

Mr. Coward's Blithe Spirit Expertly Written and Acted

By JOHN MASON BROWN

BLITHE SPIRIT is a play that only Noel Coward would have dared to write and that only he could have written successfully. It is as audacious in its subject matter as it is expert in its treatment. In it Mr. Coward turns death into the merriest of merry topics and the dear departed into the gayest of gay companions.

An improbable farce Mr. Coward calls this ghost story of his in which the novelist who is his hero ends up by being an astral bigamist, haunted in his second marriage by the shade of his first wife, and finally haunted by the shades of both his wives. But the surest proof of Mr. Coward's virtuosity is that he is able to make his improbabilities more diverting than most of the probabilities with which lesser technicians struggle.

Mr. Coward must thank his wit for this, and his superlative invention as a farceur. He starts his audience laughing at the mundane with all his customary skill before he becomes involved with the next world. Happily he takes his shades as lightly as he takes his mortals. They are the cream of his jest. But what matters, and is little short of miraculous, is that this cream so seldom sours.

* * *

The first of these shades to appear is the novelist's dead wife, who has been summoned when a medium has gone to work in his home. She not only makes his second wife's life unbearable but presents Mr. Coward with a hazard that he quickly gets over.

When this first wife reappears Mr. Coward must establish a convention. It is a tricky convention which any surrender to Peter Grimm spotlights and sentimentality would make unbearable, and which in lesser hands could easily become monotonous. Because for the sake of farce this woman must be seen and heard by her husband alone, even though she sees and hears all that is going on.

In no time Mr. Coward turns this improbability into an acceptable reality. In no time, too, he begins to put it to hilarious uses. But the real wonder of Mr. Coward's writing is that, having established his device, he is able to carry it to the giddy and measureless lengths that he does.

Just when you could swear that his theme is bound to become as tedious as a coloratura's solo concert Mr. Coward changes the register, and by doing so gives his performance a new lease on life. He does this effortlessly, with infinite suavity, with a perfect control of his materials, with an eagle's eye for what is unsuspected or unexplored in a situation, and with all those side-splitting irrelevancies which are so much to the point and add so to the delights of Mr. Coward's writing when it is at its best. If his play lacks body, remember that it deals with shades. But its spirit is of the blithest. And it is this spirit which John C. Wilson has projected expertly at the Morosco.

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Mr. Wilson has assembled an admirable cast and directed it with an invention worthy of Mr. Coward's writing. Mildred Natwick, who is one of the most gifted actresses our stage knows, has never played more brilliantly than she does as the breezy medium who wanders in and out of the proceedings. To tell the truth, Mr. Coward has never written a richer character than this Queen of Bromides, this inexhaustible fountain of *clichés*, this Mrs. Malaprop of the hackneyed. And Miss Natwick (to coin a phrase) acts her to the hilt; acts her in truth with such skill and such unction that, from fear of borrowing from her lingo, you hesitate to tell your neighbor good night.

Leonora Corbett, an English actress who is making her debut here as the novelist's first wife, is someone who can put joy in the place of shudders in a ghost story. She is a tall, beautiful, impish and very gifted young woman with a wheedling voice, who not only moves with a dancer's grace but is a ghoul who has had the good luck to go to Mainbocher in the next world.

Looking very lovely and playing with infinite charm and wisdom, Peggy Wood is to be seen as the second wife who has a luckless time of it, both here and in the hereafter. Jacqueline Clark is immensely droll as a maid who answers bells on the trot. And Clifton Webb plays the novelist with a fine felicity. He is shrewd, dapper, humorous, and has grown immensely as a comedian since he appeared on the road as The Man Who Came to Dinner.

But excellent as Mr. Webb is, it is impossible not to realize that he is haunted by one ghost who is not seen. I mean, of course, Mr. Coward himself. For Mr. Coward can be heard, clicking out his lines like pool balls sent surely into a pocket.

If Blithe Spirit is not always uproarious, it is always pleasant and unfailingly amazing as a demonstration of how a genuine magician can pull a whole rabbit farm out of one small top hat.

Reprinted from **NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE,** *November 6, 1941*

Ghosts at Play

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

OUT of beleaguered Britain comes Noel Coward's latest play, a gay, bright and brilliant farce, filled with debonair laughter. Coming from a land of devastation and destruction, it maintains its deft, airy humor and its bantering spirits with such mocking jauntiness that a world of horrors seems a dozen planets away. Dealing with death and ghosts, it creates a universe of its own in which such things are to be smiled at with unruffled mirth, and that is the only bow in the direction of an epoch of doom that this witty and mettlesome comedy deigns. Here in "Blithe Spirit" is Mr. Coward at his most brilliant, telling a merrily macabre comic tale with the lightest and most slyly hilarious of touches. His new work finds him in his best and most characteristic vein since the happy days of "Private Lives."

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Almost every play since "Hamlet" has proved that there is nothing so perilous in the theater as to put ghosts on the stage. Unawed by the bitter experience of a thousand unwary predecessors, Mr. Coward presents us with a malicious but lovely phantom of no conscience and much charm, and places her in a comedy of death that is not even as macabre as "Arsenic and Old Lace." This is the story of Charles Condomine and his second wife who call in a nearby medium and foolhardily summon from the hereafter Charles's late first wife. This latter prettily eerie lady refuses to go home when the party is over, and the resulting triangle is managed with all of that brilliant skill which Mr. Coward at his best possesses for keeping a feather balanced in the air and making the feat seem a masterpiece of artful fooling.

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There are at least two extremely vital reasons why the slender tale which Mr. Coward has to tell must be managed with the most guileful dexterity. In the first place, if the narration of his fable ever lost its bright and strangely graceful brilliance, the essential slimness of the story would become fatally patent. The second danger is that any weakening of the author's invention or deviation from the deftness of his mood would make this farce about a dead woman and her trail of destruction painful rather than the hilarious thing that it now becomes. The splendid feature of "Blithe Spirit" is that it never deviates from the spirit of banterng comedy in which it has been cast. Mr. Coward is sometimes criticized because he writes of emotions with a sort of aloof detachment which makes them seem unreal. This air of making potentially emotional states fantastic provides one of the gayest and most saving qualities of "Blithe Spirit."

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A Coward play always demands a special quality of acting and direction, and if this is not forthcoming the whole spell of the thing collapses glumly. In "Blithe Spirit" the quality is quite superbly forthcoming. To begin with, Mr. Wilson's direction is shrewd and unfailing. Then, to make everything happy, the playing is little short of perfection. Every one in the cast captures the spirit of the evening brilliantly, and it seems unreasonable to say which of the performers is most satisfying. Nevertheless I am inclined to place first of all Miss Mildred Natwick, whose impersonation of the brisk and bustling medium and a true masterpiece of comedy, which should at last bring to one of the finest of our actresses the fame she has long deserved. Miss Peggy Wood has never been more delightful than she is as the much-beset second wife. Miss Leonora Corbett, an attractive newcomer from London, makes an enchanting ghost and Mr. Clifton Webb is, of course, an ideal Coward hero. In a small but important part Miss Jacqueline Clark is admirable. "Blithe Spirit" is Mr. Coward in his most guileful mood.

"The Man With Blond Hair"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *November 5, 1941*

The Man With Blond Hair Won't Defeat the Nazis

By JOHN MASON BROWN

IT BEGINS to seem as if something really ought to be done about quite a number of our playwrights. They are well-meaning fellows; idealists and all that sort of thing. No doubt about this. Even so they ought to be taken aside and told the facts of life.

I don't mean the bees and flowers. About them they know plenty. I mean the ugly, brutal facts of a world menaced by the Nazis. They are not as bright or as right, these over-hopeful dramatists of ours, as was the little boy who insisted Dieu et Mon Droit on the British buttons meant God and Detroit.

Their wishful thinking on the subject of Hitler can only be described as alarming. A few pretty speeches spoken to democrats about democracy, and some of them appear to believe the whole ugly job will be done. They pin their faith on conversions. Let a Nazi but see how good is our way of life, they argue, and this Nazi will turn to it as a sunflower to the sun. Given enough sun, the arguments of these playwrights continues, and the readers of Mein Kampf will end up as rereaders of Little Men.

* * *

Consider Maxwell Anderson and that German officer so excellently acted by Tonio Selwart, who was touched by a love story into becoming a democrat in Candle in the Wind. Or take the Nazi who, when the final curtain fell on The Man With Blond Hair last night had abandoned Hitlerism, turned little Rollo, and was crying some such words as "Gott safe us! It vill be hard. But it can be done!" Indeed, so far as I am concerned, take almost the whole of Norman Krasna's new play, and take it wherever you will, because it seems to me as silly a bit of bluebirdism as has yet been offered as a challenge to the swastika.

Mr. Krasna is a gentleman who was last represented on Broadway by a script called Small Miracle, which was a passably exciting melodrama about a murder committed in a theater lobby. Although this time Mr. Krasna has once again been heard from in a melodrama, his new play at the Belasco is a strangely unsatisfactory piece of work.

It begins suspensively enough. It is well enough directed and well enough acted, especially by Eleanor Lynn, Dora Weissman, and Rex Williams as the trapped German. But, despite its good basic idea and its sprinkling of promising scenes, The Man With Blond Hair turns out to be an ever-increasing disappointment.

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It is Mr. Krasna's whim to imagine what would happen if two Nazis, captured by the British and interned in Canada, should escape to New York; be arrested by the local police; and then, after a contrived jailbreak, find themselves at the mercy of a Jewish family living in a tenement house. Apparently Mr. Krasna would have us believe that one of these Nazis sees the light and repents within 24 hours of being at large in America because of having listened to our radio, heard a Western Union boy sing "Happy Birthday," tasted Momma's food, and been sought by a murderous gang of vigilantes who have opened the jail door and taken the law into their own lawless hands.

To be sure, a federal officer at the evening's end does choose, in the interests of law and order, to shoot a luckless American hoodlum rather than one of the escaping Germans. But just why the other Nazi should turn democrat on the evidence supplied by Mr. Krasna will remain one of the lesser mysteries of our time.

Unfortunately, it will take more than The Man With Blond Hair to win democrats and influence Nazis. For in his latest play Mr. Krasna leaves most to be desired both as a dramatist and as a salvationist.

'THE MAN WITH BLOND HAIR'

A play in three acts by Norman Krasna; settings by Howard Bay; directed by Mr. Krasna; presented at the Belasco Theater on November 4, 1941, by Frank Ross. The cast:

Harry	Coby Ruskin
Matt	Robert Williams
John	Alfred Ryder
Frank Connors	James Gregory
Ruth Hoffman	Eleanor Lynn
Sidney	Curt Conway
Rudolph	Rex Williams
Sturner	Bernard Lenrow
Mrs. Hoffman	Dora Weissman
Messenger Boy	George Wallach
McCarthy	Francis DeSales
Harvey	Owen Martin

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *November 5, 1941*

Escaping Nazi Gets a Break In "The Man With Blond Hair"

"The Man With Blond Hair," drama by Norman Krasna. Produced by Frank Ross at the Belasco Theatre, New York, Nov. 4, 1941.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

HEY, our anti-Nazi dramatists are giving indications of softening up! A fortnight ago it was Maxwell Anderson saying that at least one of the concentration camp guards in 'Candle in the Wind" had an understanding heart.

Now it is Norman Krasna speaking for an escaped Nazi aviator out of a prison camp in Canada who insists the fellow was really touched by the kindness of a Jewish family in the Bronx the day several of the boys had a chance to shoot him and didn't do it.

Maybe we had better be warning the sanitation squad to keep a lookout for a couple of Goebbels' propaganda boys around the city dumps.

There is nothing unreasonable in either the Anderson or the Krasna approach to a tolerant human attitude. But we shouldn't like to see the thing overdone.

Actable Drama

Krasna's play is a taut little drama in which the author employs that natural gift for building suspense that made his "Small Miracle" an outstanding melodrama in 1934 and send him to Hollywood.

The story is pure stage fiction, based on the adventure of the Nazi aviator who escaped across the ice into Detroit some months ago and found his way eventually back to Germany.

The Krasna hero is a lad with blond hair the heroine renames Rudolph. He, too, is a Nazi aviator and he has got as far as New York with a second Nazi fugitive on the lam, as the lads say.

The police pick the pair of them up in New York and are holding them for the federal authorities when certain young patriots in the Bronx, one a rookie cop, decide to take them out and beat them up in payment for a lot of things.

One eludes the trap. The other is about to toss himself off an apartment house roof when a Bronx girl saves him. Not for himself, but because she doesn't want her boy friends to pile up trouble for themselves over the escape.

Nazi Reform

Two days in the girl's apartment, playing rummy with her kindly Jewish mamma and learning the American Bronx way of life by listening to the radio and the heroine talk of freedom, reduce the boy to a beaten Nazi pleading for forgiveness.

It doesn't quite add up in logic, any of it. Nazis don't change over night. But it is a holding dramatic story in the telling. Last night's audience was sitting upright and tense most of the evening, and seemed emotionally impressed by the compromise ending.

The performances are good. Eleanor Lynn is featured in the billing, but her opportunities are not very generous. Rex Williams, playing the taciturn squarehead, manages with few words to convey the lad's slow thought processes. Curt Conway, Robert Williams, James Gregory and Coby Ruskin are the revenge-smitten boys.

Dora Weissman has a jolly time playing mamma, and makes a good deal more of the opportunity than many of her sisters similarly cast.

Howard Bay has done a couple of nice settings, and Mr. Krasna's direction gets the most from his play.

"The Man With Blond Hair"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *November 5, 1941*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The Man With Blond Hair"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HAVING faith in the goodness of human nature, Norman Krasna has succeeded in reforming a Nazi in "The Man With Blond Hair," which was acted at the Belasco last evening. He has written a melodrama that contains several interesting individual scenes, offers two excellent tenement settings by Howard Bay and bits of engaging acting, especially by Eleanor Lynn and Dora Weissman. This correspondent was never bored by Mr. Krasna's lesson in good works toward a common enemy, but it could never believe his melodrama. It looked very like a loosely-contrived and whimsical play, more interested in bravura scenes than integrity.

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What Mr. Krasna seems to be saying is that no Nazi can resist the hospitality and good-will of Americans. Two Nazis, who have escaped from Canada, are in jail in New York, and mighty offensive, too. One of the neighborhood boys, who happens to be a policeman, plots with his gang to let them out and give them a good beating up in private. But the gang is not very efficient in torture; both Nazis escape and one of them is secreted in an apartment by a girl who does not want the neighborhood boys to get into trouble. A little good food and the virtuous simplicity of Jewish life on the East Side undermine his morale. He concludes by asking his captors to help save the Nazis from themselves.

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While Mr. Krasna is teetering along the plot he writes some original scenes. The introductory scene on a tenement roof is amusingly casual. The scene in which the neighborhood boys try in vain to become torturers has a good notion behind it. There is a brief sardonic scene in which the Nazis talk wistfully of food and a pleasant scene in which one of them plays cards with a Jewish mother. But the melodrama is full of convenient loopholes, through which Mr. Krasna wriggles into one of his good scenes. If American boys are no more quick-witted than the amiable lads he has invented, the jig is up and we may as well cable Hitler our regrets. Mr. Krasna's battle with his plot is desperate and clever, but he never quite succeeds in making it come true.

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Whenever a Jewish momma appears in a play, gossiping about the neighbors and plying young men with food, every one in the theatre beams with fond good-humor. Dora Weissman has such a part in this play. Every one in last night's audience was prepared to adopt her, for she acts the part with glowing good-nature. Although Miss Lynn's part is ambiguous, she plays it with light and spirit. Rex Williams's laconical and sullen Nazi gives the performance a solid underpinning. There are good bits by Coby Ruskin, Robert Williams, Alfred Ryder, Curt Conway and James Gregory as the crusading neighborhood boys.

Both as writer and director Mr. Krasna has talent for individual scenes. To make a plausible story out of them he would have to square the circle.

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *November 5, 1941*

'The Man With Blond Hair,' a Smallish Melodrama, Opens at the Belasco

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

NORMAN KRASNA, who once wrote a neat little melodrama called "Small Miracle," guns for bigger game in "The Man With Blond Hair," which opened last evening at the Belasco. Mr. Krasna is out after the Nazis now and is intent on proving that, if sufficiently prodded, they may sometimes be reformed. It takes a spot of shooting to do it, and a good bit of scurrying up and down fire escapes.

It is Mr. Krasna's somewhat improbable contention that a handful of young Americans, enraged at Nazidom, get a couple of escaping Germans out of a New York jail, where they have landed midway in flight from Canada. The boys plan to beat up Hitler's minions, but they prove themselves more zealous than expert. Both villains get away while being taken to a tenement roof for chastisement, and one of them finds refuge in the flat of a comfortable Jewish woman and her lovely daughter. It takes three acts, some shooting out of a window and numerous excursions up and down a dumbwaiter shaft to reform this unhardened disciple of tyranny. In the end, as the Mr. Krasna's rather minor excitements die away, the Nazi pleads brokenly that we not despair of the German people, who may yet be brought, as he has been, to see the light.

This conclusion is encouraging, but, like much of Mr. Krasna's play, it fails to convince. There is good writing in "The Man With Blond Hair." The dialogue is often pungent and seldom foolish and it is possible almost to believe in several of the characters. But the plot leaks at every seam and midway of the play it founders entirely in a lake of conversation. The play is part inexpert melodrama, part rather routine disquisition on the merits of our free institutions. It is never adequate either to its theme or its gunplay, and I am afraid it neither excites nor moves. It is merely a little anecdote which Mr. Krasna has made up, hurriedly and out of insufficient material.

The acting does a good deal for it. Eleanor Lynn, as the Nazi's rescuing angel, is more convincing than her lines. Dora Weissman is engagingly persuasive as Mrs. Hoffman, and Rex Williams does an excellent job as the converted Nazi. There is admirable acting also by Coby Ruskin, Robert Williams, Alfred Ryder, James Gregory and Curt Conway, and George Wallach is fun as a doleful messenger boy. But acting can't do what Mr. Krasna has left undone.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *November 5, 1941*

"The Man With Blond Hair" Another Play About the Nazis

By WILELLA WALDORF

NORMAN KRASNA has come out of the West with an anti-Nazi drama entitled "The Man With Blond Hair" which he staged last night at the Belasco Theatre, with Frank Ross listed as producer.

Before he left Broadway for the film studios, Mr. Krasna, if we remember correctly, wrote a play called "Small Miracle" that had its moments. Like so many other people nowadays, however, he is much too disturbed about the Nazis to write a good play about them.

His idea is basically an interesting one. What might happen, he asks, if a couple of German aviators interned in Canada were to escape, find their way to this country, and one of them, by some means or other, found himself living for a few days with a Jewish girl and her mother in a New York tenement?

The chief trouble is imagining how such a thing might come about, and Mr. Krasna never does succeed in being even faintly convincing in his melodramatic account of blond Rudolph's little visit with the Hoffmans. The two Nazis, he asks us to believe, are picked up by the police for trying to rob a grocery store, and while occupying cells awaiting the arrival of Federal officers, behave so abominably that a young cop and four of his pals decide to beat them up.

The young cop leaves the door of their cell open, and before any beating up takes place, both Germans escape. The younger is taken in by the Hoffman girl, a school teacher, because her boy friend is involved in the plot and she is afraid he will get into trouble.

Mr. Krasna obviously intends his drama to be a realistic one, and although Howard Bay's rooftop setting was the only thing about the first act that rang true, we decided to accept the fact that the Man With Blond Hair, somehow or other, had finally reached the New York tenement, and see what happened then.

What happened was some routine gun-pulling melodrama, self-conscious comedy, and a weak attempt to show the Awakening of a Nazi in Democratic surroundings. If the author had developed his thesis brilliantly, we would still be inclined to swallow his first act—even if it stuck a little going down—but what followed was so poorly contrived that the meal seemed more and more unpalatable as the evening progressed. And Mr. Krasna hitched on a final curtain line for the young Nazi that was positively embarrassing.

An excellent cast is involved in this unfortunate production. Rex Williams is splendidly cast in the title role, and his performance is so convincing that sometimes he almost succeeds in making the play seem real. Eleanor Lynn as the Hoffman girl also is most helpful and Doro Weissman plays the Jewish mother knowingly. Curt Conway, Coby Ruskin and the rest of the boys do their best to persuade us that they are actually as idiotic as their actions would indicate.

Mr. Krasna, in fact, is a much better director and casting expert than he is a playwright, at least in this instance. It is too bad to see so much honest effort wasted, but there is no doubt about it. "The Man With Blond Hair" must be set down as the latest addition to a growing list of bad plays about the Nazis.

"The Man With Blond Hair"

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
November 5, 1941

Mr. Krasna Ought To See a Barber

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

NORMAN KRASNA had a fairly startling idea. He thought of turning loose a couple of full-fledged Nazis—who had escaped from a concentration camp in Canada—in a Jewish East Side tenement. There, it would seem, his thinking abruptly stopped. Presumably the idea excited him so much, or seemed so dead certain to ring the bell, that without looking to left or right he plunged feverishly into his script. Just how he went about it really doesn't matter, however. For the play is a farrago of incompetence, tastelessness and absurdity, lacking even the excitement that crude melodrama can very often provide.

It goes wrong right from the start. Mr. Krasna concocts the most puerile and far-fetched scheme imaginable just to get his Nazis into the tenement. And once he gets them there, he lets them hang around without anything really happening until almost the middle of the last act. Perhaps he intended their mere presence to be ominous, and the delayed action to create a kind of unbearable suspense. But nothing can seem very ominous while a Jewish mother, so broadly characterised as to be four-fifths caricature, is allowed to take over the stage and indulge in an unending number of deplorable comments and cracks.

And when, finally, things do happen, in a swirl of cheap melodrama followed by a spate of even cheaper sentimentality — in which one of the Nazis is neatly converted to the American way—the play sinks to its lowest level of all.

Mr. Krasna has directed *The Man With Blond Hair* almost as badly, I'm afraid, as he has written it; and, in such circumstances, talented people like Eleanor Lynn, James Gregory, Rex Williams, Alfred Ryder and others have simply no chance to distinguish themselves.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
November 5, 1941

War Bulletin

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

THE latest communique from the dramatic front must report that the Nazis have won another victory and the American stage is in full retreat. The newest defeat is something or other called "The Man With Blond Hair," and in quality it is little more than a skirmish. Our valiant actors put up a heroic resistance to the enemy's assaults, but being improperly supported by their playwright's artillery, they soon found themselves battered and crushed and were forced to give way when their ammunition gave out altogether. There are strong but unconfirmed rumors that some Hollywood fifth-columning is suspected.

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Anyway, Norman Krasna, who is quite an important fellow in the cinema capital, has written a play about how a fugitive German prisoner from Canada learns tolerance and human decency from a Jewish family in New York. At first Mr. Krasna called his drama "Fire Escape." Now it has been changed to "The Man With Blond Hair," and it can be said without fear of contradiction that there is nothing in his little narrative so entertaining as that particular change of title. There is one other extraneous claim to interest in the play. The more villainous of the Nazis is played by an actor who looks fascinatingly like the member of the Avon Comedy Four who used to say that he was dubious.

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At first it seemed likely that "The Man With Blond Hair" was going in for a bit of antic playfulness. That, at least, was the general suspicion when some American boys, aroused by the insults of the two Nazi fugitives, lured them away from the police and then pretended that they were going to drink the blood of one of the Germans. Fortunately, when that quaint scene was ended the Jewish heroine helped the less objectionable of the Teutons to escape from his tormentors and concealed him in her flat. There, I am happy to tell you, they were properly chaperoned by her comic but very noble mother.

• • •

Probably it is giving away no secret to report that when the less offensive Nazi discovers that the New York police are willing to shoot an American to save a German from being assassinated, he is so impressed that he asks for mercy and gives himself and his comrade up. Somewhere during the course of all of this activity there is an opportunity for a debate about totalitarianism and democracy between the young Nazi and the Jewish girl that is at least fatuous enough to be believable. It is all very feeble and ineffectual, with only the playing of Rex Williams as the sullen but basically decent fugitive to give it conviction. Nevertheless, Miss Eleanor Lynn and some other hardworking players strive admirably.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *November 5, 1941*

'Man With Blond Hair' Opens at the Belasco

Escaped Nazi Flier Trapped in Jewish Tenement, Central Situation in Play

By JOHN ANDERSON

NORMAN KRASNA, who once wrote a moderately successful play called "Small Miracle" and then became a Hollywood big shot, has turned his hand again to the drama, and from the results of "The Man With Blond Hair" at the Belasco last night it appeared that his hand, in the meantime, has turned all thumbs.

His melodrama of an escaped Nazi aviator trapped in a Jewish tenement flat in Manhattan has obvious possibilities for excitement, but they remain stubborn possibilities. For in dialogue and situation it sounds more like "The Rover Boys Play Hitler, or Fun on the Fire Escape."

Mr. Krasna's idea is fathered by the wishful thinking that if a nice little Nazi ape-boy could be brought face to face with American democracy he would see his mistake and abandon his wicked habits. Though this is a pretty theory on which I, for one, would not place too much reliance, it is used, let us remember, also by Maxwell Anderson in "Candle in the Wind," when a young Elite Guardsman gets an attack of conscience and helps Miss Helen Hayes out of one fix—and Mr. Anderson out of another.

But the point where Mr. Krasna's idea and his plot takes a heavy tumble in the picture he presents in the very first scene of American civilization. He shows us five young men, one of them a policeman, plotting to spring a couple of Nazi aviators out of a jail cell so they can catch them and beat them up and then put them back in.

They feel that they are too well treated, and ought to get a little rough stuff, and I need hardly point out that as an example of organized hoodlumism it is no better than the Nazi brand. On this basis you could easily justify any mob with any piece of rope and any victim, since Nazism is merely Judge Lynch in gold braid.

Once Mr. Krasna has established this as the underlying movement of his plot nothing he can say in the way of hearty compliments for the American way has much effect. There's no sense patting the Bill of Rights on the back after you've just kicked its slats in.

He shows us a young Jewish girl taking the Nazi in to protect the girl's sweetheart who is one of the mob. He shows the girl's old mother playing gin rummy with a man she thinks is a refugee, and having a grand time slamming Hitler.

He shows us an FBI man causing the death of one of the mob to save the life of one of the Nazis, and finally, in a tableau of heaving bosoms and choking emotion, he exhibits the presumably touching reformation of the blond brute, begging Americans to save him and his brethren.

If this is not one hundred per cent claptrap I surrender the word for definition, and offer the scene in evidence along with the last scene of "East Lynne." The Nazi is just this side of sprouting little pink wings, and I half expected an orchestra to break into "Hearts and Flowers."

Good Performances

If I could have believed in Mr. Krasna's ideas while I was still in the theatre it would have been something. I could then, at least, admit the craftiness of his playwriting. But apart from its confused ideas the play is not successfully wrought. It loiters along without developing any momentum, so that its mildly humorous scenes are by far the most successful since they seem to be amiable detours in which the author is not going anywhere anyway and knows it.

Possibly if the author had not directed the play himself some of its more serious structural mistakes could have been avoided. But for what it is he has done a good job of direction, since he has a canny stage sense and a sly knowledge of timing.

He also has some good references from the cast, notably by Eleanor Lynn, Dora Weissman, and Rex Williams. Miss Lynn is very appealing as the girl, Miss Weissman, pleasantly comic as the mother, and Mr. Williams entirely believable as the Nazi, in everything except the final impossible posture.

In the scenery department Howard Bay has designed an admirable Manhattan roof-top, avoiding most of the banal clutter of the usual stage picture, and he has created a tenement living room credible enough in size, and yet accessible enough for playing hide and seek, which is a neat trick when a scene designer can do it.

It's a pity his work doesn't shelter a play better than this one which, to label its total artificiality, ought to be called "The Man with the Peroxide Toupee."